

OLD VANDERHAVEN'S WILL.

BY MARY E. PENN.

A GOLDEN summer evening some fifteen years ago. The shadow of the Belfry Tower lay aslant the sunny market-place of the ancient city of Bruges, and the musical chimes fell sweetly on the warm, still, evening air, as they played the Shadow Song from Dinorah.

The old houses which surrounded the place, with their quaint "step" gables, carved timbers, and deep-set casements, seemed to have fallen asleep in the sunshine, dreaming perhaps of the days when Bruges was one of the centres of the world's commerce; when her haughty burghers lived like princes, and the ministers of twenty nations resided within her walls.

One of the largest and most picturesque of the ancient tenements—formerly the Guild-house of a wealthy Corporation—was occupied by M. Nicolas Vanderhaven, who, after a busy and prosperous life as a merchant at Antwerp, had retired to spend the evening of his days in his native city.

On the first floor, looking out on the Market-place, was a spacious apartment which had been the Banquet chamber of the Guild, and was now used as a studio by M. Vanderhaven's grandson. No artist could have desired more harmonious surroundings. The room, though unfurnished, was a picture in itself; with its painted ceiling, walls panelled in dark polished oak, superb Renaissance chimney-piece, and the sixteenth-century tapestry that hung before the door. Portraits of the members of the Guild still occupied their old places on the walls, but on a panel to the right of the chimney-piece hung a more modern picture, representing an ancestor of the present proprietor, in whose family the house had been for many generations.

The only occupant of the room this summer evening was Bernhardt Vanderhaven, a handsome, dark-eyed young fellow, with moustache and short pointed beard, dressed, with a certain affectation of carelessness, in a quaintly-cut velvet blouse and open collar.

He had drawn his easel close to the window to catch the failing light, and was painting industriously, puffing at his cigarette meantime, and only pausing now and then to cast a half-reproachful glance at the darkening sky.

At length he drew back, looking at his work with a critical frown. Gradually his brow relaxed, and a smile stole to his lips.

"Yes, it is like her," he muttered; "very like! Just that wistful

look in the eyes, and the tender, trustful smile I know so well. My sweet Annette !”

The painting was a half-length portrait of a young girl in the richly picturesque costume of a noble Flemish lady of the seventeenth century ; a girl with a delicate, oval face, only faintly tinted with rose-colour ; sweet, smiling lips, and softest hazel eyes, which had a dreamy, “out-looking” gaze that gave a touch of spirituality to her beauty. The young man studied every line of the sweet face as if he had never seen it before. So absorbed was he that he did not hear the opening of the door, and started when a familiar voice behind him said, drily : “I fear I am interrupting you, Bernhardt. Shall I come again when you are less occupied ?”

“You caught me dawdling for once, grandfather,” the young man answered, turning towards the intruder with a pleasant smile ; “but I have been working furiously all day, and my picture is nearly finished.”

“I am glad to hear it,” was the reply, as, without even glancing at the canvas, the intruder took his seat on the only chair the room contained, unceremoniously sweeping on to the floor a heap of drapery which encumbered it.

Monsieur Nicolas Vanderhaven was a handsome, vigorous man of seventy, with few signs of age about him, save his silvered hair and the thick, white brows, beneath which his keen eyes glittered “like fire under snow.” His chin was square and firm, and his closely-shut mouth would have been terribly grim but for some lines about the corners, which showed a gleam of humour and kindliness. His face was a pretty fair index to his character ; shrewd, hard, but not unkindly, and capable on occasion of generous impulses.

“I am glad to hear it,” he repeated. “There has been enough, and rather too much, of dreaming and daubing : it is time you began life in earnest.”

Bernhardt raised his brows.

“I thought I had begun it in very serious earnest,” he returned, with a half smile, standing with one foot on the rail of his painting-stool, and his elbow on his knee. “I have worked hard enough lately to satisfy even you, Monsieur.”

“Worked ? humph, well—if you call that work. But who is the better for it ? What comes of it all ?”

“Nothing yet perhaps, but fame and fortune will come of it some day—at least, I hope so,” added Bernhardt ; “and that hope is my guiding star.”

“A will-o'-the-wisp that will lead you into a swamp,” was the encouraging comment.

The young man laughed, and tossed back his long hair.

“Come, grandfather, how can you tell what my chances are ?” he said good-humouredly ; “you never even glance at my pictures. I should be glad if you would, for you are an excellent judge of painting, though you have such a contempt for artists.”

"Artists who are worthy the name have my admiration and respect," answered Mr. Vanderhaven deliberately. "I only despise those shallow pretenders who make art an excuse for idleness and affectation; for wearing abnormal coats and beards" (his listener winced slightly); "leading abnormal lives, and being altogether chartered as Bohemians. However, enough of that," he continued. "I want to have a little serious talk with you."

The young artist gave a resigned sort of shrug, and perching himself on his painting-stool, prepared to listen.

"You will be twenty-one on the first of next month," his grandfather began. "You have not forgotten our agreement?"

"No, sir; I have not forgotten. You were to leave me free to follow my own devices till I was of age, then I was to choose between art and commerce; to decide whether I would go on with my painting, or join my cousin in the house at Antwerp, of which you are still the nominal head."

"Exactly. Well?"

"Well—I have chosen art, or rather art has chosen me. She has called, and I must follow, whether she rewards me or not. I am sorry to disappoint you, grandfather, knowing you had set your heart on my entering the firm, but—it is impossible. I should never be a man of business. I am a painter or nothing."

Ominously grim grew his companion's face as he listened, and the lines about his mouth had nothing humorous now, but he replied quietly enough.

"Very good. You are prepared to take the consequences of your decision, I presume?"

"The consequences? I am prepared to work hard and bide my time, if that is what you mean."

"Not quite. Are you prepared to earn your own living? Will your brush find you food to eat, clothes to wear, and a roof to cover you?"

"Well—not yet, perhaps; I haven't tried to sell my pictures; but after a time——"

"After a time, when fame and fortune have found you—just so. Meanwhile, you see, like many another 'genius' before you, you stand a chance of starving in a garret."

Bernhardt stared at him in astonishment and dismay.

"I don't understand," he began; "you do not mean——"

"I do not mean to keep you here in luxury and idleness, when you have set my wishes at defiance, upset my plans, and frustrated the ambition of my life."

"What was that?" his grandson interrupted.

"To leave the old firm as I found it, flourishing under the old name, that has been transmitted stainless from father to son for four generations—since the time of our founder, Simon Vanderhaven." And he glanced at the old portrait by the chimney-piece, which seemed to look back at him with sympathy and approval.

"But my cousin Cornelius—" Bernhardt began.

"Your cousin is an excellent manager, and a keen man of business—somewhat too keen, perhaps—but he is not a Vanderhaven. I had hoped that your father would have been my successor, but he is gone before me. You will soon be the last of the old stock."

Bernhardt was silent a moment, looking at his grandfather with compunction and regret.

"Grandfather," he faltered, "I did not understand—I did not know you felt it so deeply. Believe me, I am grieved to disappoint you, but——"

"Grieve for yourself, rather, if you disobey me," was the sternly-spoken rejoinder. "But I do not accept your decision as final," added M. Vanderhaven as he rose; "I give you to the end of the month to reconsider it."

Bernhardt followed him to the door, and held back the tapestry, looking wistfully into his face.

"It would be easy to decide if I had only myself to think of," he muttered; "but there is Annette—I mean there is some one else who has a right to be considered."

The old gentleman stopped short on the threshold. "A-ah?" he said, interrogatively. "And who is 'Annette,' if you please?"

"She is—her name is van Elven," he stammered.

"The daughter of that van Elven who died bankrupt a few years ago?"

Bernhardt coloured. "He was an honourable man, though unfortunate. He left a name as stainless as our own."

"Have I said to the contrary? But he died bankrupt, and left his wife and daughter to live on charity—or starve."

"They do neither, Monsieur. Annette maintains herself and her mother by lace-making."

The other made a sort of grimace. "And you propose to make this little lace girl your wife?"

"With your permission, Monsieur."

"Or without it," was the dry addition. "You will ask her advice in the matter we have been discussing, I suppose?"

"I—yes, I shall certainly consult her."

"And let her decide for you," the old merchant recommended, glancing shrewdly at him under his heavy brows. "I will wager she takes my view of the subject when she knows what is at stake. Women are wonderfully clear-sighted and reasonable where their own interests are concerned. I leave my cause with perfect confidence in Mademoiselle Annette's hands." And with an ironical bow and smile, he passed over the threshold, and closed the door.

Left to himself, the young man paced the room with a face of troubled thought. Yes, Annette would take his grandfather's view of the case, he supposed, though not, as the latter had cynically suggested, from interested motives. It was not poverty she would

fear, but the separation which was inevitable if he were cast at once on his own resources. It might be years before he could ask her to share his lot, and he had no right to expect that she should waste her youth in waiting for him.

And yet, to give up the one purpose and ambition of his life : to turn his back on the luminous heights that rose before him, and descend to the grey and level plain ! It was hard indeed.

He glanced round the room, and thought of the happy hours he had spent there, in eager pursuit of the ideal ; of the fair visions that had kept him company, the hopes that had lured him on. Would love itself compensate him for all he would lose in losing art ?

The sound of the chimes roused him from his troubled reflections. He glanced at his watch.

"A quarter to seven ! I did not know it was so late. I promised to meet Annette on the Pont du Béguinage at sunset."

He put aside his brushes and palette, and exchanging his blouse for a coat, left the house and took his way to one of the innumerable bridges which give the old city its Flemish name. He was first at the trysting-place.

He folded his arms on the parapet railing, and looked thoughtfully at the familiar scene before him. In the background rose the tall spire of Notre Dame, bathed in the golden glow of sunset, while the group of roofs and gables at its base were lost in purple shade. The picturesque, irregular old houses which bordered the canal were built for the most part sheer to the water, with little terraces or balconies overhanging it, but some had a strip of garden between, with a boat moored under a willow. Every detail of the scene was reflected in the still water as in a mirror, except where, here and there, the picture was broken by a floating network of water-lily leaves. Beyond the bridge was the archway leading to the Béguinage ; the chapel bell was summoning the sisters to "Benediction." Presently the church clock struck seven ; then once more the belfry chimes rang out, softened by distance.

The golden summer evening, the gently flowing water, the softly chiming bells all blended together in a charm that soothed and cheered him.

He took out his pocket sketch-book, and was dotting down the outlines of the scene, when the sound of a light footstep made him turn.

It was Annette. She did not see him at first, and he watched her as she advanced, glancing about her with her soft, short-sighted eyes. How sweet she looked, he thought, with her pretty, pensive mouth and dreamy eyes ; those eyes which had always a shade of tender melancholy, even when her lips smiled, as they did most brightly when he came forward to meet her.

Yes, she was worth any sacrifice, he decided. His mind was made up now as to the course he should take.

"Have I kept you waiting?" she asked, giving him a dainty little hand that a duchess might have envied. "I have been very busy finishing some work. Daylight grows precious after midsummer."

"You try your eyes too much, dear," he said, looking at her tenderly. "You know they are not strong, and if you overwork them they may fail you altogether some day."

"Do not suggest anything so terrible," she said, with a little shiver, passing her hand over them. "Have you been drawing?" she continued, looking at his sketch-book.

"It is only an outline," he returned, showing it to her.

"The view from here would make a beautiful picture," she remarked; "you must paint it some day, for me."

"I shall paint no more, Annette."

She looked up, startled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," he returned with a forced laugh, "that in future I am to be a slave of the quill instead of the brush. You remember I told you my grandfather wished me to enter the business when I was of age?"

"And you have consented?"

"Not yet, but I must. He tells me if I refuse he will turn me adrift; then you and I must part. That is not to be thought of, is it, darling?"

"So it is for my sake you are giving up your art?" she said regretfully.

"No, for my own, because I can live without art, but I can't live without you," was his reply, as he drew her hand through his arm.

"And you are quite sure it does not grieve you to relinquish all your dreams of fame?" she questioned, with a wistful smile. "Perhaps after all it would not have made you happier, if you had won it. 'Laurels have a bitter taste,' the old poet says."

"Yes, but a true artist does not work for 'laurels' only. The service of art is its own reward. I should hardly care for fame if I felt that I had produced good work, which would live when I was forgotten—as I once hoped to do. Ah well," he added, with a quick sigh, "I must forget my old dreams, and outlive my old self, if I can. Perhaps I shall develop an unsuspected genius for commerce—who knows?"

He laughed rather drearily, and looked straight before him, as if he were gazing down the long grey vista of the new life on which he was to enter. That look and tone were a revelation to his companion. She realized for the first time what the sacrifice cost him.

"Bernhardt, you will not be happy," she exclaimed with sudden conviction. "You can never adapt yourself to a life so unsuited for you, in which all your talents and capabilities will be wasted. Your nature must be crushed to fit it. Your grandfather does not understand this, but I do, and I dare not accept such a sacrifice. Tell



ROBERT BARNES

R. AND E. TAYLOR.

"HAVE I KEPT YOU WAITING?" SHE ASKED.

me, dear," she went on, laying her hand on his arm, "what would you do if you were free—if it were not for me, I mean?"

"I should borrow a few hundred francs of my cousin and go to Rome," he answered.

"Yes; you could live cheaply there, and you would have congenial companions, and learn all that the great masters could teach you. Why should you not go?"

"And leave you, Annette?"

"Not for long, I hope. Dearest," she added earnestly, "I would rather part from you for ever than live to feel that I had been the means of spoiling your life. You shall go to Rome."

"No, no! do not tempt me," he interposed, turning his head aside.

"Yes; for my sake," she persisted. "That you may win a name I shall be proud to bear some day."

"That day may never come, Annette."

"Everything comes to those who can wait," she quoted, smiling, though her eyes were full of tears; "and you would not have to wait long for success; I am sure of it."

His face flushed and paled; he looked troubled and wavering.

"Well," he said at length, "I need not decide now. I have a whole month to consider. Let us talk of something else."

She said no more, but she foresaw what his decision would be, and, bravely as she had spoken, her heart sank when she thought of the coming separation. She had a reason which Bernhardt did not guess for fearing the future. She had never acknowledged to him the dread which had haunted her lately, growing heavier every day. If he had suspected that hidden trouble, nothing would have induced him to leave her.

II.

ON the morning of the first of July, Monsieur Vanderhaven sat at breakfast in his dining-room, a pleasant old room, the prevailing tint of which was a sober brown, relieved with brighter touches of colour here and there, in a repoussé salver, or Grès-de-Flandres vase, and in the rich bindings of the books which lined one of the walls.

When he had finished his cup of café-au-lait, he touched the bell at his elbow. The summons was answered by his housekeeper, a stately, high-nosed old dame, wearing the cap and fichu of her native province of Liège.

"Tell Monsieur Bernhardt that I wish to speak to him."

Instead of leaving the room she closed the door, and approached him mysteriously.

"He is not in the house, Monsieur," she said. "His bed has not been slept in, and—and I have just found this letter, addressed to you, on his table."

She lingered, watching him curiously, as he opened it. He dis-

missed her with one sharp word, then read it through, his face growing darker with every line.

"So—he is gone to study in Rome," he repeated, with a sour smile, when he had finished. "Very well; he may starve in Rome. I have done with him."

He took a vesta-match from the inkstand, twisted the letter, deliberately burnt it, and then mounted the stairs to the Banquet-room. The painting materials were gone, but the unfinished portrait remained on the easel.

He frowned as his eyes fell upon it. He guessed whom it represented, and his heart was bitter against this girl, who, it seemed from Bernhardt's letter, had encouraged him in his disobedience.

A palette-knife lay on the ledge of the easel; in a sudden impulse of resentment he took it up, and was about to cut the canvas from the frame, but as he raised his hand, the sweet eyes seemed to meet his with a wistful appeal, as if in deprecation of his anger. His hand fell, his brow relaxed; he gazed at the fair face with a sort of fascination.

Then, as he noted the execution of the picture, a new expression dawned in his eyes; a mingling of astonishment and half-reluctant admiration. If the lad could paint in this way at twenty, what might he not achieve when his powers were matured? An uncomfortable feeling took possession of the old merchant. Had he been mistaken after all? Had Bernhardt done wisely in disobeying him?

With an impatient movement of the head, he dismissed the unwelcome doubt, and taking the picture from the easel, turned it with its face to the wall, then left the room, locking the door and putting the key in his pocket.

"If anyone enquires after my grandson, you may say that he is travelling," he told old Ursula, briefly; and from that day Bernhardt's name was spoken no more in his old home.

The months went by. Summer waned into autumn, and autumn into winter—a winter of the "good old-fashioned" type; invigorating to the young and healthy, but terrible to the weak, the aged and the poor.

One bitter December afternoon, Annette van Elven and her mother were alone in the little room which now served them as bed and sitting-room both, on the first floor of a house in a dull grass-grown side-street not far from the Cathedral.

Madame van Elven, a fair, fragile-looking woman, who had been beautiful in her youth, and was still attractive, though worn by suffering, sat in a cushioned arm-chair near the stove, while Annette crouched on the hearth, her head drooping, her hands idly folded on her lap, in an attitude of listless dejection. The snow outside was hardly whiter than her cheeks, and her eyes had a veiled look that made them more pathetic than ever.

"How quiet you are, dear!" her companion said, breaking a long silence; "are you asleep?"

"No, I was thinking," she answered, with an effort. "I was wondering what sort of Christmas Bernhardt would have in Rome."

"A pleasant one, no doubt. Pleasanter than ours will be. Poverty weighs lightly on him: it is all part of the romance of his artist life. But with us it is bitter reality," she added, with a sigh.

Annette did not reply, but her face grew if possible sadder than before.

"Did M. Lebrun pay you for the piece of lace you took to him this morning, dear?" asked Madame van Elven after a pause.

"No; he—I shall have to go again," Annette answered, hesitatingly.

She dared not tell her mother the truth—namely, that the tradesman had declined her work, as too imperfect for sale. What she had long dreaded had come to pass: her sight would no longer serve for her employment.

"You are tired; I can tell by your voice," her companion said tenderly, and putting out her hand, she drew the girl to her side.

Annette let her head sink on her mother's knee, and closed her eyes, with a deep, long-drawn sigh. Yes, she was tired; so tired that she almost felt as if it would be happiness to sleep and never wake again; to give up altogether the weary struggle that grew harder every day.

They were sitting in the same position when, ten minutes later, an unfamiliar footstep sounded on the stairs, and there was a tap at the door. Annette rose, smoothing her disordered hair, and opened it. A stranger stood there; a comely old woman, in the picturesque costume of a Liègeoise.

"Mademoiselle Annette van Elven?" she said, interrogatively, and when the latter assented, handed her a letter, adding: "I have had some trouble to find you, Mam'selle. My master said I was to wait for an answer."

"Is your master M. Lebrun?" Annette enquired.

"No; M. Vanderhaven," the old servant replied, glancing shrewdly at her face.

The girl started, turning from white to red. Recovering from her surprise, however, she placed a chair for her visitor, lighted the lamp, and then, returning to her mother's side, read the note aloud.

"MADEMOISELLE,—I wish to see you, but am prevented by illness from calling upon you. Will you do me the favour to return with my servant? I shall not detain you long.—Yours,

"NICOLAS VANDERHAVEN."

"I suppose he is anxious to have news of Bernhardt," was her mother's whispered comment. "You will go, dear?"

"Yes," Annette assented. "Has M. Vanderhaven been long ill?" she asked Ursula, as she put on her hat and jacket.

"All the winter, on and off; it began with a bad cold. But he has never been quite the same since M. Bernhardt went away."

Annette said no more, and they presently left the house together.

"Please to come upstairs," her companion said, when they were admitted to the old Guild-house; and she led the way up the broad, oak staircase to the Banquet-room. It was furnished now; a great wood fire burned on the wide hearth, and a Japanese screen shut out the draught.

Monsieur Vanderhaven was seated near the fire, with his back towards them; a tall, gaunt figure in a grey dressing-gown and velvet cap. When his visitor entered he gave her a scrutinizing glance under his heavy brows, and bowed, but did not rise, as he motioned her to a seat.

"Mademoiselle van Elven," he began when they were alone, "I believe you are in correspondence with my grandson?"

"Yes, Monsieur," she answered, quietly, though her heart was fluttering. "I have heard from him frequently since he left home."

"Since you sent him away," he corrected; "it was by your advice, I believe, that he went?"

"I advised him, as I thought, for the best, and I have reason to believe that I was right. He tells me that he is making rapid progress, and that his pictures have already attracted attention. I believe there is a brilliant future before him."

"Humph! we shall see," was the remark. "Be kind enough to give me his address. It may be necessary for me to write to him," and he pushed the inkstand towards her.

She took up the pen, but there seemed to be a mist before the paper. After one attempt she shook her head, and held it out to him.

"My eyes will not serve me at all to-night," she said, with a deprecating smile; "the address is ——"

"What is the matter with your eyes?" he interrupted.

"I have over-tried them at lace-making. They have been failing me some time."

"You ought to have advice about them," said M. Vanderhaven, more gently than he had yet spoken. He had felt bitterly towards her when she entered, but somehow his resentment seemed to be melting away before the gentle composure of her manner, and the patient sweetness of her smile.

"I have, Monsieur. The doctor tells me there is no organic disease; if I could give them complete rest for a time they would serve me for my whole life to come."

"And are you resting them?"

"I must now—against my will," she answered, with an involuntary sigh. "I can work at my lace-pillow no longer."

"And how do you intend to employ yourself?"

She shook her head and made no reply.

He looked at her steadily a moment, slowly rubbing his chin, then dipped the pen in ink.

"You said the address was ——"

"Number 12, Via Margutta, Rome," she answered, and rose, thinking the interview was at an end.

"Wait a moment," he interposed as he wrote. "I have something to say to you."

He seemed in no hurry to say it, however. Having written the address, he methodically folded the paper and placed it in his pocket-book, took off his spectacles, and put them in their case; then looked up.

"I have a proposal to make to you," he began abruptly. "It has occurred to me that I may be able to assist you and serve myself at the same time. I am in failing health, I need a companion and attendant—someone who would not set my nerves on edge as professional nurses do. Should you be inclined to accept the post?"

She looked at him as if doubting whether she had heard correctly.

"Do you mean—to live here, Monsieur?"

"Yes. Of course you could see your mother every day, and I should enable you to give her the comfort and attendance she needs."

"You are very kind," she faltered, "but ——"

"Am I so formidable that you dare not trust yourself with me?" he asked, with a grave smile which softened his features wonderfully, giving them a vague resemblance to Bernhardt's.

Her face caught the reflection of his, and brightened suddenly.

"No indeed," she said, with an answering smile; "if I hesitated, it was because I feared I might not be competent ——"

"Then you will come?" he interrupted.

"Yes, Monsieur, and I will do my best to please you. It will make me happy to be of service to ——"

"Bernhardt's grandfather?" he finished; "just so. Then that is settled. Shake hands on it."

When she gave him her hand he detained it, looking up at her so intently that she blushed, she hardly knew why.

"When are you going to write to this distinguished artist?" he demanded.

"Very shortly. To-morrow perhaps. Have you any message for him?" she asked wistfully.

He paused, apparently forgetting that he still held her hand, and looked thoughtfully at the fire. She watched his face anxiously, reading there the signs of a struggle between pride and affection.

"Tell him I am glad to learn that he is making good progress in the profession he has chosen ——"

"Yes?" she prompted, as he paused. He glanced at her wistful face and smiled.

"And you may say that if he is not too busy to allow himself a holiday, he may spend Christmas with me—with us, that is."

The girl's heart leaped; a thrill of exquisite happiness brought the tears to her eyes.

With a sudden impulse she stooped and kissed the wrinkled hand that held her own.

The old merchant patted her cheek. "Tut, tut, silly child; save your kisses for someone who has a right to them," he said.

Two days later Annette began her new duties, and was soon as much at home in the old Guild-house as if she had lived there for years. She was happy in her new life, and her young presence so brightened the house that M. Vanderhaven found himself wondering how he could have endured its gloom and solitude before she came.

The time passed pleasantly to both of them, and every day brought nearer the meeting which, in his heart, the old merchant longed for as much as she did, though he seldom mentioned his grandson's name.

"Only five days till Christmas," Annette remarked one evening, looking up from the knitting which kept her fingers busy while her eyes and thoughts were free.

They were in the Banquet-room; Monsieur Vanderhaven reclining in a capacious leather fauteuil near the fire, while Annette sat opposite to him in a low, straight-backed tapestry chair. The old room, with its panelled walls and antique furniture, formed a picturesque background to her girlish figure.

Her companion was staring thoughtfully at the fire, with the newspaper on his knee. Her words roused him from his abstraction.

"So soon? I had forgotten how time went."

"Bernhardt will be with us on Christmas Eve," she added.

"Ah! and that reminds me; there is something I intended to do before he returned." He turned his chair to the table. "Give me pen and ink, my dear."

She placed writing materials before him, and then paused, struck by the haggard pallor of his face.

"Are you feeling worse to-night, Monsieur?"

"Worse? No, child; I am better, if anything," he answered, cheerfully. "I was thinking, only a moment ago, that I might yet live to see my great-grandchildren round me in the old house."

He glanced at his companion, who "suddenly, sweetly, strangely blushed," and became absorbed in her work again.

His pen travelled rapidly over the paper, only pausing now and then to make an alteration or addition. When he had covered four pages with his clear, firm handwriting, he glanced over what he had written, seemed satisfied with it, and made a fair copy on a fresh sheet. Then he looked up.

"Will you tell Ursula and Jacob that I want them for a few moments?"

She left the room, and gave his message to the two old servants, remaining downstairs till they returned, which they did very shortly, looking mysterious and important.

As she re-entered the room, she fancied she heard the click of a drawer or door hastily shut; but the screen being so arranged as to enclose the hearth, she could see nothing until she had passed round it. Then she found Monsieur Vanderhaven standing with his arm on the massive chimney-piece, watching the burning of a piece of paper, which he had just thrown upon the logs.

He did not speak till she had been seated some moments.

"I have been making my will," he said, abruptly, at length: "I made one six months ago, in a moment of anger, but that shall be destroyed before Bernhardt returns. By this new one I have left him everything except the business, and that he will not grudge to his cousin. I shall give it into Maître Janssen's keeping to-morrow. Meantime," he added, with a curious smile, "I have put it in a safe place, where it would be difficult to ——"

He stopped abruptly, putting his hand to his head. The blood suffused his face to the temples, then retreated, leaving him lividly pale. He staggered, and would have fallen if Annette had not supported him. She bent over him in alarm as he sank into a chair.

"It is nothing," he gasped; "a passing faintness ——"

He drew one or two heavy breaths, and seemed to recover somewhat, though his face was still white and haggard.

"Good girl, good girl," he said, touching her cheek as she bent over him; "you deserve to be happy, and you shall be. You will live here, you and Bernhardt; he will have this for his painting-room again. He will make a name—yes, the lad was right; he is an artist. Never let the old house go into strange hands—I love it. It has sheltered my people for more than a century; ever since the time of old Simon Vanderhaven, yonder," and he nodded towards the portrait with a smile of friendly recognition, then sat silent, looking into the bright hollows of the fire.

"I am drowsy," he said at last; "I think I could sleep."

Annette stood near him till his eyes closed, then returned to her seat. But she could not work. She felt uneasy and depressed. Her eyes dwelt with a sort of fascination on the motionless figure opposite, only glancing away now and then at the flickering fire, or out through the uncurtained window at the bare moon-lit Place, where the shadows of the quaint old houses lay black on the snow-whitened pavement.

About a quarter of an hour had passed thus, when she heard the muffled roll of carriage-wheels approaching the house. They paused at the door, and there was a knock which sounded unnaturally loud in the silence. She started to her feet. Could it be Bernhardt, who had arrived before his time? was the first thought that flashed across her.

Assuring herself that M. Vanderhaven was still sleeping, she went out into the landing, and leaned over the heavy carved balustrade, looking down into the lamp-lit hall. Yes—it was Bernhardt who stood there, laughing at old Ursula's shrill questions and exclamations, as he dismissed the carriage and closed the door.

Annette's glad little cry caught his ear at once. He looked up, flung his travelling-wraps on to the floor, and bounded upstairs.

"My darling, my darling!" was all he could say at first, between a shower of kisses. "How I have longed for you all these weary months!"

"And I for you," she whispered shyly, as she looked up into his face, bronzed and older-looking, but handsomer than ever, she thought, with a thrill of pride.

"And to find you here to welcome me; it seems like a fairy tale! You must have bewitched my grandfather. And your eyes, darling?" he went on tenderly, bending to look into them. "If you had told me that trouble before, I should never have left you. Are they better?"

"So much better that I warn you I shall be able to detect all the faults in your pictures," was her laughing reply. "But you haven't explained yet why you are here four days before your time? We did not expect you till Christmas Eve."

"I feared if I delayed I should be snow-bound. There have been several falls, and some of the lines are blocked."

"I am glad you came to-day," she said, more gravely. "I have been so anxious."

"Is my grandfather worse?" he asked quickly.

"I fear so, though he will not admit it. He was speaking of you just now. I know he longs to see you. Come."

Hand in hand they passed into the room, bright with fire-light and lamp-light. The old merchant had not moved. His head rested against the back of the chair; his hands were folded in an attitude of peaceful repose.

"He is asleep," she whispered; "he —— Oh, Bernhardt, what is it?"

For the young man, after one glance at the placid face, uttered an inarticulate cry, and sank on his knees before the chair. Monsieur Vanderhaven was sleeping "the sleep that knows no waking."

III.

It was Christmas Eve. The grave had closed over Nicolas Vanderhaven. All the dismal bustle of the funeral was over, and those interested in the old merchant's will were assembled in the dining-room to hear it read by the notary.

The party was not a large one, consisting only of Bernhardt, his cousin, Cornelius Dewint, from Antwerp, a stout, florid, prosperous-looking personage of middle age, with a loud voice and a self-

assertive manner; Ursula, and Jacob the butler, and lastly, Annette, who was present at Bernhardt's desire.

The notary, a little, spare, high-dried man, in a dusty brown wig, and gold eye-glass, glanced round at the party as he unfolded a sheet of crackling parchment.

"This will was deposited with me by my late client some six months ago," he began. "It ——"

"Excuse me, Maître Janssen," Bernhardt interrupted: "I am informed that there is a later one, which my grandfather made only a few hours before his death."

"Yes, he wrote it in my presence," Annette put in.

"And we witnessed it, Jacob and I," spoke old Ursula. "The master sent for us on purpose."

Monsieur Dewint wheeled round in his chair, and stared from one speaker to another, while the lawyer looked under his eye-glass at Annette. "Indeed? I was not aware of it," he said.

"Monsieur Vanderhaven intended to have placed it with you the next morning," she continued. "He said the first will was made in a moment of irritation, and he wished it to be destroyed before Bernhardt returned."

"As Mademoiselle was so far in my uncle's confidence, perhaps she can tell us the contents of this second will?" suggested Cornelius, with a veiled sneer which brought the colour to Bernhardt's cheek.

"Yes," Annette answered quietly. "M. Vanderhaven told me that his grandson would inherit everything except the business at Antwerp, which was left to yourself, Monsieur."

He gave a sort of grunt, and pulled his beard discontentedly.

"Well, where is it? Why is it not produced?" was his demand.

"We have not looked for it yet," Bernhardt replied, "but it must be somewhere in the Banquet-room, as my grandfather never left that apartment alive after he made it."

"Then we must find it at once," Maître Janssen said, rising. "If it exists this is so much waste paper," and he threw the parchment on to the table.

"All the same, perhaps you will oblige me by reading that," Cornelius Dewint suggested. The notary glanced at Bernhardt.

"By all means, if my cousin wishes it," replied the latter. "I think I can guess the contents."

The document was short and to the point. The business at Antwerp, and all the real and personal estate—chargeable with annuities for the old servants—were left to Cornelius Dewint, on condition that he neither let, sold, or demolished the old Guild-house, while Bernhardt came in for an ironical bequest of five hundred francs—"to buy paint and canvas."

Annette looked distressed, and the young man flushed hotly.

"I don't wonder my grandfather was anxious to revoke a will so unjust," he commented.

"It remains to be proved whether he did revoke it," was his cousin's remark. "I have a sort of presentiment that this second document will not be forthcoming."

Bernhardt answered only by a slight shrug, as he rose and led the way to the Banquet-room.

Nothing had been disturbed since the old merchant's death. His chair still stood in its place with the screen behind it; the ashes remained on the cold hearth. Annette's knitting lay where she had thrown it down. Inexpressibly forlorn it all looked in the waning light of the winter afternoon, and in their various ways every member of the party felt the depressing influence of the scene.

"If the paper is within these four walls we shall soon find it," the notary observed, unconsciously lowering his voice.

And indeed, with the exception of an old press, where Bernhardt had been in the habit of keeping his painting materials, there seemed no place where it could be stowed away.

The will was not in the press, however, nor was it to be found elsewhere. They searched systematically; examining every nook and corner of the old room, sounding the panelling and the flooring, looking behind and under the furniture, and not desisting in their quest till everyone, except Annette, was convinced that it was in vain.

"But it must be here," the girl exclaimed excitedly; "it cannot have been spirited away. M. Vanderhaven told me that he had put it in a safe place ——"

"The fire, probably," was Cornelius Dewint's suggestion. "My belief is—with all deference to Mademoiselle—that my uncle changed his mind at the last moment, and destroyed it."

"I am positive he did not," she asserted. "He was scarcely alone with it a moment, for directly the servants left him, I returned, and it was then that he told me the contents. He was standing there, by the chimney-piece."

Bernhardt, who stood near the window, looking out into the dusk, turned and beckoned to her. "Did you not tell me that he had been burning a paper?" he asked in an undertone.

"Yes, but it—I thought it was the rough draft of the will."

"Might he not, by inadvertence, have destroyed the will itself?"

She did not answer, but her heart sank. It seemed only too likely that such was the case. There was a pause. It was nearly dark now, and the faces of the little group were lit by a lamp on the chimney-piece. The young man stood with his back to the rest, looking down at the Market-place, where the snow was falling heavily.

At length the silence was broken by Monsieur Dewint, who left the notary's side and approached his cousin.

"Well, Bernhardt, you see I was right," he began, in a loud, cheer-

ful voice, rattling the loose cash in his pockets. "This mysterious document is non est inventus. Of course I feel for your disappointment; still, you can hardly expect me to give up the property off-hand to please you. Such generosity is rare—off the stage. You are not going to dispute the will, I presume?"

"No. I think it an unjust one, and I believe my grandfather had intended to revoke it, but no other being producible, it is perfectly valid. You are in your own house, cousin," and he bowed to the new master with formal politeness.

The latter glanced about him disparagingly. "H'm—it is no great acquisition. If I had my way I should pull down the old baraque, and build a good house in its place. Well," he continued, "suppose we go downstairs; this room is as cold as a vault."

He passed out, followed by Maître Janssen, but the other two lingered.

"Annette, my sweet, do not look so sorrowful," Bernhardt said, encircling her with his arm; "why, the loss of this fortune seems to trouble you more than it does me."

"For your sake," she faltered; "for myself, I am not afraid of poverty. It is so strange, so inexplicable, that the will should have disappeared in this way," she continued. "I am convinced that it is in the room at this moment, if we only knew where to look for it."

She moved from his side, and cast her eyes thoughtfully round. He shook his head.

"It is not here, or we should have found it," he said. "Try to think no more of it, dear; we cannot ——"

The words died on his lips as he looked at his companion.

She was standing in the middle of the room, her hands hanging at her sides, her eyes fixed and dilated, gazing into space. Every trace of colour had faded from her face. He sprang to her side.

"Good heavens, Annette—what is it? Are you ill?"

She drew a long breath, and looked at him like one waking from a dream. "No, I am not ill," she whispered, "but I have the strangest feeling. As if—as if there were someone else in the room with us ——"

She shivered and glanced nervously round the long, shadowy apartment, which was only half-lighted by the lamp on the chimney-piece. Bernhardt involuntarily did the same, but they were the only occupants.

"You see that we are alone," he said. "You are tired and over-excited, darling: you need rest. It is snowing so heavily that you cannot leave the house at present. Go and lie down, and I will send Ursula to you."

She acquiesced mechanically, and allowed him to lead her to the door. Her hand was deadly cold, and her eyes looked dreamy and absent. He kissed her cheek, and detained her a moment, looking into her face with anxious tenderness; but she turned from him

without another word, and mounted the stairs to the little room she had called her own. Five minutes later old Ursula entered with a tray, and found her lying on the bed in the dark.

"I've brought you a cup of coffee, Mam'selle Annette," the old servant said. "Monsieur Bernhardt hopes you are better; and the 'new master'" (she jerked her chin aggressively) "graciously allows you to spend the night here, as it is snowing so heavily. Eh!" she broke off, "it makes me angry to see the airs he gives himself, and to think how different things would have been, but for the loss of a sheet of paper! Well, 'tis to be hoped old master doesn't know—rest his soul!" she added, piously.

Annette drank her coffee in silence, and gave back the empty cup.

"Can I do anything else for you?" her companion asked. "You look as white as a Lent lily."

"I am tired; I shall try to sleep," she answered, sinking back among her pillows. Ursula threw a coverlet over her and retired, leaving the candle on the mantelshelf.

Night closed in. A solemn, tranquil winter night; the earth wrapped in a mantle of new-fallen snow, the sky glittering with innumerable stars. An almost preternatural stillness brooded over the old city, lying asleep in the snow and starlight. It seemed like an enchanted place, hushed by some drowsy spell. No footprints marked the white pavements, no sound broke the silence of the earth and air, save when at intervals the chimes rang out with a "strange unearthly music," telling how the hours crept on towards Christmas Morn.

When the moon's silver disc rose behind the Belfry Tower, one broad ray of cold ethereal light streamed on to the bed where Annette lay, still dressed, and sleeping profoundly. For several hours her rest was tranquil and oblivious, but towards midnight she was visited by a strange dream.

She seemed to be still lying on the bed, in the half-conscious state between sleeping and waking. Her eyes were open, but she was only vaguely aware of surrounding objects, of the moonlight streaming on the bed, and the glimpse of white house roofs seen through the window opposite.

Suddenly she was roused, she thought, from this dreamy lethargy, by a voice in the room, close to her, calling her name. She started and sat up, thrilling in every nerve, but not with fear. Drawing aside the curtains, she looked towards the spot from which the voice proceeded.

The room, save where the moon-beams lighted it, was lost in shadow, yet she fancied she could discern the outlines of a figure, standing near the hearth. As she looked, it moved forward into the ray of light by the bedside, and then, with a sudden shock of startled recognition, she saw that it was Monsieur Vanderhaven, who stood looking at her with eyes full of urgent purpose.

"Annette!" the low but imperious voice repeated, "the will

must be found. Come!" and he beckoned her towards the door.

After the first moment she seemed, with the curious insensibility of the dreamer, to feel neither surprise nor fear. She rose without hesitation and followed him down the stairs to the Banquet-room. The door was partly open, and the room within was lighted by a lamp, as when she had seen it last.

Her conductor crossed over to the hearth, and extended his hand to the portrait of his ancestor, which hung on a panel to the left of the chimney-piece.

"Master Simon can keep a secret," he said, with the grave smile so familiar to her; "you would never have thought of searching here. Look!"

She pressed forward eagerly as he touched the picture, but at the same moment a hand was laid on her shoulder, and another voice exclaimed, "Annette!"

Then with a start and cry she woke—woke in earnest this time—to find herself standing in the Banquet-room, with Bernhardt's astonished face bending over her. She looked round bewilderedly, trembling with a vague terror. Then, as remembrance returned, an expression of blank disappointment crossed her face.

"Oh, was it only a dream?"

"Were you asleep!" he exclaimed. "If I had known that, I should not have ventured to wake you. I was sorting and destroying some old sketches in these folios; it took me longer than I had expected, but I had just finished, and was about to leave the room, when you entered. You walked straight to the fireplace, and looked intently at the portrait. You were stretching out your hand towards it when I touched you. Did you dream about it, dear?"

"Yes. Oh, Bernhardt, such a strange dream."

"What was it? tell me," he said, making her sit down.

In low, awe-struck tones she related it, glancing now and then over her shoulder at the shadowy room behind them. "It was so real, so vivid," she concluded, "that I can hardly believe it was merely a dream."

He had listened with breathless interest and growing excitement. When she had finished he started to his feet.

"Dream or not," he exclaimed, "I believe it has given us a clue to the hiding-place of the will. It never occurred to us that there might be a cupboard behind that portrait."

Annette clasped her hands. "Oh—let us look at once!"

"Hold the lamp, I will take the picture down," he said; but he found this was impossible, as it was fastened with cramps to the panelled wall.

"There must be a spring somewhere," he muttered, passing his hand down by the side of the frame, "or else—stay, what is this?"

His fingers had encountered a slight obstruction in the polished

woodwork ; a small metal knob or button, which was effectually concealed by the shadow of the heavy frame.

He pressed it, and immediately the panel with the portrait upon it started open, disclosing a deep square cupboard. The lovers looked at each other, too excited to speak.

"Hold the lamp higher," he whispered, putting his hand into the cupboard.

The first thing brought to light was a bundle of old letters, tied with faded ribbon, and still retaining the ghost of their first perfume ; then came a miniature in a case of Bernhardt's father, when a boy, and finally—a folded sheet of letter paper, inscribed, in Monsieur Vanderhaven's clear, commercial hand, "This is my last Will."

Annette placed the lamp on the table, and looked over his shoulder as he unfolded the paper. One glance showed him that the contents were as she had stated. The business was left to his cousin, and all the rest, without reserve or condition, was his own. Their eyes met in an eloquent look.

"But for your dream we should never have found it," he said. "How strange—how mysterious it seems !"

"Was it only a dream ?" she questioned, under her breath.

They were silent ; a feeling of awe and reverence overpowered them. "If he knows, he is happy now, as we are," the young man said at last. They clasped hands, and looked into each other's eyes, reading there the brightness of the future, from which all shadows and perplexities had passed away.

And as they stood thus, hand in hand, in the silence of the sleeping house, suddenly there rang out from the Belfry Tower the midnight carillon, ushering in the blessed Christmas morn. Sweet, strange, solemn chimes, falling on the silence in a silvery stream of music, like the voices of wandering angels, singing, "Peace on earth, goodwill towards men !"

"A happy Christmas, and a good new year !" Bernhardt exclaimed, as he bent to kiss the sweet face uplifted to his.

